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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 70 (2013) 387 – 396

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Akdeniz Language Studies Conference 2012

# The relationship between learning strategy use and starting age of learning EFL

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## Abstract

This study investigated the use of language learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners who began learning English at different ages. Thirty three male and female learners in a language centre were divided into 2 groups: those who began learning English before age 9 (the younger group, n=16) and those who began at or after 12 (the older group, n=17). All participants were administered a translated version of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which included 50 items. The analysis of the quantitative data was done using SPSS. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between the younger and older beginners. A follow-up interview was also conducted to elicit learners' attitudes towards learning English at different ages. The results indicated that while the older beginners regarded English as a tool they needed for further studies and work, the younger beginners regarded English as a medium for communication. Further findings and implications are discussed in the paper.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of ALSC 2012

**Keywords:** Language learning strategies; Iranian EFL learners; strategy training; starting age of learning

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## 1. Introduction

Have you ever heard 'the younger, the better'? Many people believe that younger children are more effective language learners than older learners. Steinberg (1993) states that the critical age for full first language learning lies somewhere under twelve and thirteen years but over ages of six and seven. Studies conducted by Snow (1983) and Singleton (1992) showed that starting age has an effect on the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of achievement.

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Snow (1983) found that children learnt more slowly than adults did but surpassed adult learners in the long run. There are other researchers who have opposite views regarding an early start in second language learning through instruction. For example, Lightbown and Spada (1993) found that learners who begin learning a second language at the primary school level do not do far better in the long run than those who begin in early adolescence.

As far as learning strategies are concerned, Chamot (1987) found that effective second language learners did use a lot of metacognitive and social/affective strategies. Accordingly, training on the use of metacognitive and social/affective strategies seems to be important for success in planning a language course which, as Nunan (1999) and Dam (1995) put it, is helpful in maintaining or even enhancing students' motivation and autonomy in learning English. However, not much research seems to have been carried out on the use of learning strategies by young and old second language learners. Abraham and Vann (1987) found different language learners using different learning strategies and related it to their background characteristics. Benson and Lor (1999), in their study on the learners' beliefs about language learning and language learning strategies, found that the students' differing beliefs were constrained by their different conceptions of the learning process.

Learning strategies and age are two major variables contributing to individual learner differences in the process and mechanism of second language acquisition (Ellis, 1994). Skehan (1989) points out that factors like motivation, aptitude and age all influence strategy use, and concludes that strategies vary simply as a function of age. The present study aimed to explore whether students' starting age of learning English as a foreign language influences the frequency and choice of language learning strategies and whether younger and older beginners hold different attitudes on English.

## 1. Review of Literature

With the emergence of cognitive psychology which assigned an active role of processing to human brain in learning, researchers in different fields began to investigate various characteristics of learners and in particular, learning strategies as specific attacks that learners make on a given problem (Brown, 1994). According to Oxford (2001), learning strategies are the mental, conscious steps or actions taken by learners to facilitate a task, make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

Wenden (1987) describes a learning strategy in terms of three dimensions. First, it refers to the language learning behaviors a learner actually engages in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language (i.e., strategies). Second, it refers to what learners know about the strategies they use (i.e., strategic knowledge). Finally, it describes what learners know about aspects of their language learning other than the strategies they use, e.g., what personal factors facilitate L2 learning. Oxford (1990) has listed the key features of language learning strategies as follows: Learning Strategies a) contribute to the main goal of learning, which is communicative competence, b) allow learners to become more self-directed, c) expand the role of the teachers, d) are problem-oriented, e) are specific actions taken by the learner, f) involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognition, g) support learning both directly and indirectly, h) are not always observable, i) are often conscious, j) can be taught, k) are flexible, and l) are influenced by a variety of factors.

From the 1980s onward, researchers have tried to identify broad classes of learning strategies, under which more specific strategies could be grouped. Rubin (1981), for example, identified three kinds of strategies which contribute directly or indirectly to language learning: learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. Learning strategies contribute to the development of the language system and affect leaning directly, whereas communication and social strategies contribute indirectly to language learning.

In Oxford (1990), a distinction is made between direct and indirect strategies. The former consist of “strategies that directly involve the target language” in the sense that they “require mental processing of the language” (p.37), while the latter “provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy, and other means” (p.151). Direct strategies involve memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies; and indirect strategies include three subcategories of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Each subcategory is broken down into two further levels with an overlap between some of the strategies. Planning, for instance can be regarded both as a metacognitive and, because it requires reasoning, as a cognitive strategy.

Language learning strategies are usually contrasted with communication strategies and learning styles. Brown (1980, p.65) draws a clear distinction between learning strategies and communication strategies on the grounds that “communication is the output modality and learning is the input modality”. With regard to learning styles, due to their problem-oriented nature, strategies are used when a learner is faced with a specific learning difficulty, and his/her strategic approach may change in accordance with the nature of the learning problem faced. While styles are inward, relatively fixed and could not be changed from one learning task to the next (Brown, 1994), language learning strategies (LLS) are outward, often conscious, and teachable techniques for the improvement of language learning. However, in some cases, the two complement each other, with styles made obvious by learning strategies (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003).

Most studies in the field of LLS have tried to illustrate the effect of different factors on the choice and use of LLS. Under the heading of “factors affecting strategy choice”, Ellis (1994) refers to individual learner differences, including beliefs about language learning, and learner factors, the learner’s personal background and situational and social factors as factors affecting strategy choice. As Oxford and Nyikos (1989) note, many of these factors such as language learning level, national origin, field of specialization, and language teaching methods have definitely been shown to be strongly related to language learners’ choice of strategies, but others such as age, motivation and gender have until now not received enough research attention to lead to firm conclusions.

Regarding LLS, researchers have found differences between the two genders. Some studies (e.g., Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman, 1990) found that females use strategies more frequently than males. On the other hand, there are various studies showing males using more strategies than female (e.g., Wharton, 2000; Tercanlioglu, 2004). Meanwhile, there are a few cases reporting that gender made no significant difference in the use of strategies (e.g., Hayatzadeh, 2007; Wafa, 2003). Additionally, age is the other factor affecting the way strategies are used. Young children have been observed to employ simple strategies and in a task-specific manner, while older children and adults make use of more complex, sophisticated, and generalized strategies, which they employ more flexibly (Brown, Bransford, Ferrera, & Campione, 1983; Ellis, 1994). Oxford (1990) also found that students of different ages and stages of L2 learning use different strategies, with certain strategies being used more by the older or more advanced learners. Among other studies done on the areas of factors affecting the use of language learning strategies are learners’ proficiency level and strategy use (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995). Shoery (1999), for instance, found that more advanced learners use more learning strategies. The effect of motivation on language learning strategy use by highlighted by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) whose findings revealed that “motivation had a pervasive influence on the reported use of specific kinds of strategies, as well as on the degree of active involvement in language learning as reflected in the overall frequency of strategy use in general (p.79). Some studies concluded that learners’ nationality affects their language learning strategy use. For example, Wharton (2000) found that bilingual Asian students learning a third language (English) favored social strategies more than any other type. Dickinson (1987) reports that learning strategies are seen as particularly important in the enhancement of learner autonomy, because the use or adoption of appropriate strategies allows learners to take more responsibility for their own

learning. And as Wenden (1987) puts it, “one of the leading educational goals of the research on learner strategies is an autonomous language learner” (p.8). Successful and effective language learners are reported to use more strategies than less successful and ineffective ones (e.g., Rubin, 1987; Chamot et al., 1998). Related to the issue of training students on strategy use, Rubin (1987) and Hosenfeld (1979) assume that strategies can be made available to less successful learners and that the teacher has an important role in providing an environment facilitating the identification and use of strategies and also suggesting alternative strategies which work best for students.

There are studies that proved “the younger” might not be really “the better” in learning a second language (e.g., Snow, 1983; Singleton, 1995). In a study on the acquisition of Dutch by English speakers, Snow and Hoefoagel-Hohle (1983) found that the older learners did better and faster than younger ones and that the teenagers had the best performance compared to the young children and adults. They conclude that children learn more slowly but keep going longer, to the point where they ultimately catch up and surpass adult learners.

The present study sought to complement the previous research studies on the factors affecting strategy use, as there were few comparative works that have focused on the relationship between language learning strategies and starting age of learning English as a Foreign Language. The followings are the five hypotheses forming the basis of this research study:

1. *There are no differences in the use of language learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners who began learning English at different ages.*
2. *There are no differences between the attitudes of younger beginners and older beginners toward English.*

## 2. Method

The present study aimed to explore the use of language learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners who began learning English at different ages. It was hypothesized that there are no differences in the frequency of language learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners who began learning English at different ages.

### 3.1 Design of the study

This study is a comparative study of the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners who began learning English at different ages and can be claimed to enjoy a mixed approach (both qualitative and quantitative) design.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 33 Iranian EFL learners (12 males and 21 females) who were studying English in Mehr Language Institute in Hamedan, Iran. They were divided into two groups, based on their starting ages in learning English. Those who began learning English before age nine, i.e., younger beginners (group A,  $n = 16$ ) and those who began learning it after age twelve, i.e., the older beginners (group B,  $n = 17$ ).

### 3.3 Instruments

In order to measure the frequency of strategy use by participants, a translated version of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7.0 was used. This version, including 50 statements, is utilized for the learners of English as a foreign language. The SILL asks students to identify the strategies that make the students to react to a series of strategy descriptions, such as, “I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them”. It uses a 5-point Likert scale from *never true of me*, to *usually not true of me*, *somewhat true of me*, *usually true of me*, and *always true of me*. It has six subcategories of LLS: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

In this study, the alpha reliability was estimated at .76 which is above its acceptable value of .70 (Litwin, 1995; Bobko, 2001).

Next, after the questionnaire survey, 10 participants (2 males and 8 females; 5 from each group) voluntarily attended a structured interview (conducted in Persian), designed to provide information on their attitudes toward learning English.

### *3.4. Procedure*

In early March 2010, all the 33 participants were administered the SILL questionnaire. Having received the instructions, they filled in their responses to the 50 Likert scale items. They were also encouraged to ask questions when confused. A few questions were raised regarding the meaning of some technical words, e.g., rhymes. The whole procedure was conducted smoothly in Persian and was completed in 30 minutes. A structured interview was also conducted in Persian with 10 candidates as described above.

### *3.5. Data analysis*

For the quantitative part of the data, first, the mean of each participant's total score in the 50 statements was calculated. Then the mean scores for both group A (younger beginners) and group B (older beginners) was obtained. ANOVA was run to find out if the groups' mean differences were statistically significant. As far as qualitative data is concerned, the responses from the two groups were compared to find out whether different groups held different attitudes to learning English.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1. Quantitative analysis*

The quantitative analysis involved comparing the subjects' responses in the 50-item SILL questionnaire. These items were put under 6 strategy groups. These groups were memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Each participant wrote down his/her responses on a Likert scale to reflect how true of them each statement was. The bigger the number, the more the statement was true of the participant. Each participant had 50 scores after completing the SILL. To explore the participants' frequency of strategy use, their scores were analyzed in the following ways.

First, through averaging each participant's scores in all the 50 statements, their means were obtained (Figure1). Getting a mean score for both groups A and B, the two groups' means of scores in all strategy groups were compared.

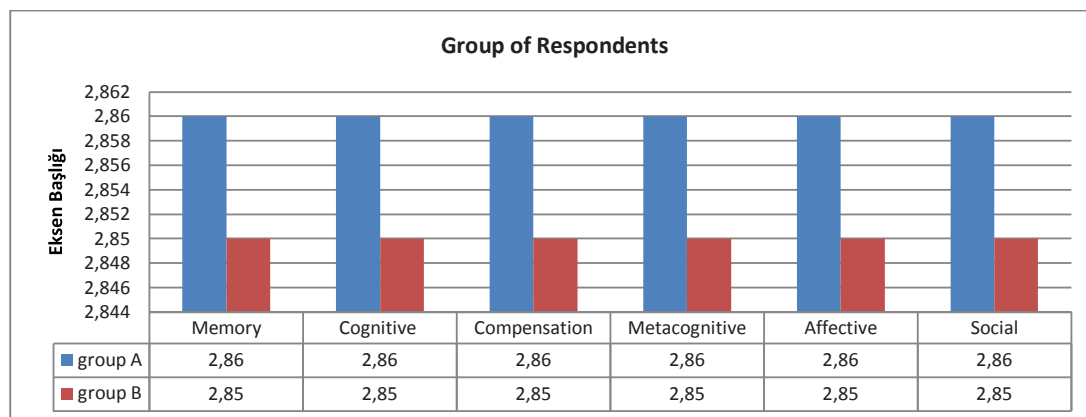


Fig. 1. mean scores in all strategy groups

An ANOVA was employed to find out if the difference in the mean of scores of the two groups of the participants was statistically significant. Since the sig. value was .986, it was concluded that group A, the younger beginners, did not differ significantly from group B, the older beginners in the use of strategy use. In other words, neither younger nor older beginners used more language learning strategies.

To further investigate the participants' use of LLS, the two groups' means of scores in each strategy group was compared (Figure 2). Group A's mean of scores were higher than those of group B's in three kinds of strategies; namely, memory, compensation, and social strategies. However, group A's means of scores were lower than those of group B's in three other kinds of strategies; namely, cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies.

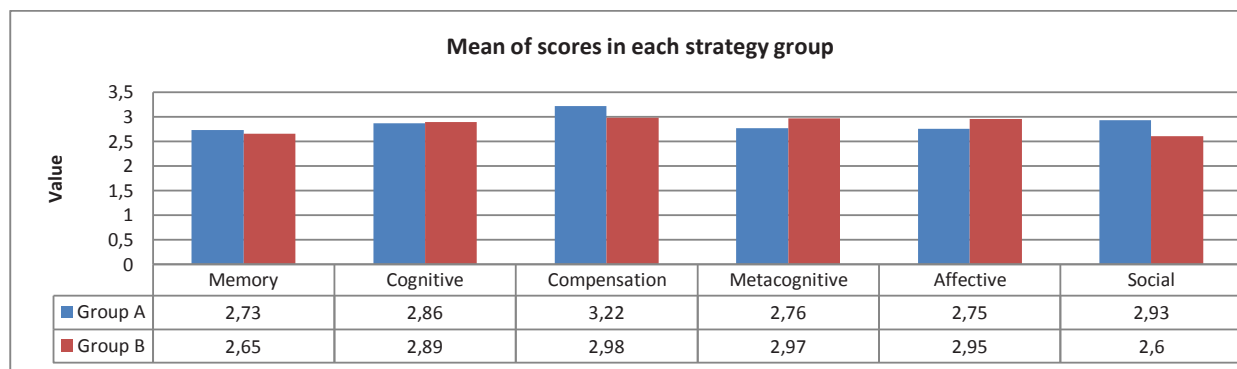


Fig. 2. distribution of mean of scores in each strategy group

Another ANOVA was run out to find out whether the difference in the mean of scores of the two groups of participants in each strategy group was statistically significant. Since all the significance levels ranged from .225 to .889, it was concluded that group A, i.e., the younger beginners, did not differ significantly from group B, i.e., the older beginners, in strategy use, in neither strategy group. In other words, neither younger nor older beginners used more language learning strategies in any one of the six strategy groups.



### 3.2. *Qualitative analysis*

The analysis of the interview seemed to suggest that there were a lot of differences in the choice of language learning strategies between the two groups of participants. It was obvious that the younger beginners used more types of language learning strategies than the older beginners. However, the older beginners were more practical and used more LLS to enhance English language learning.

Further it was found that as regards their goals in learning English, group A were not as ambitious as group B. The two groups had differing attitudes towards learning English. Having a positive attitude toward learning English, group A reported that they found English as a language for communication and enjoyment. Group B, although did not have negative attitudes toward learning English, regarded it merely as a school subject they needed for future study and carrier. Younger beginners and older beginners also reported their teachers' influence on their learning differently. Group A stated that their use of LLS owed much to their teacher' advice and instructions, but group B mentioned very little of the influence of their teachers on their learning and especially on their use of LLS. It seemed that the way these older beginners coped with learning English depended greatly on their own conceptions and beliefs of language learning.

## 4. Discussion

The findings here support previous research (Samway and McKeon, 2002; Snow, 1983) in that older learners are not less effective learners than younger ones. These researchers are of the idea that "the younger, the better" is only a myth about acquiring a second language, meaning that many people believe it but it is untrue. The observations also confirm the findings of Singleton (1995) in that an early start is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to acquire a native-like accent. In line with the findings of Lightbown and Spada (1993, p. 42) "learners who began learning a second language at the primary school do not fare better in the long run than those who began in early adolescence. On the whole there is no strong evidence to support "the younger, the better" belief and an early start in second language learning.

The findings of this study revealed that neither the older nor the younger beginners used more language learning strategies and nor was there any association between the frequency of strategy use and the two groups' starting ages in learning English. However, the qualitative data based on the participants' responses to the interviews indicated a lot of differences in the frequency of use of LLS by students with different starting ages. The results indicated that the classification of the LLS influenced the evaluation on the frequency of the use of LLS.

Although no great differences were found, the younger beginners seemed to use slightly more LLS than the older beginners. The former used more cognitive strategies, but the latter used more of the compensation strategies. When the students' use of LLS was compared by strategy sets and examples, more differences between the two groups' use of LLS were revealed.

There were similar findings in the analysis of the content of the interviews. The results indicated that the broader the classification of the LLS, the less contrast there was between the two groups of students. From the above discussion, it seemed that the structured interview would be a more reliable and useful tool than the SILL since it could reveal more detail regarding the use of LLS by students who began learning English at different ages rather than like what SILL actually do to hide the qualities of them.

The results of the SILL showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the choices of LLS by students who began learning English at different ages. However, evaluation of participants' interviews showed that there were many differences between the two groups' strategy choice and particularly the reasons for their strategy choice. The younger beginners' choice of strategy use was greatly influenced by their teachers but older beginners had their own conceptions of language learning. The above findings showed that the younger beginners were passive in learning and the older beginners were examination-oriented. There were also differences between the two groups' choice of language learning strategies in practicing the four language skills. Another explanation to the contrasting results in

the SILL and interviews was related to the characteristics of the students who were interviewed. The interviewees were all volunteers and their responses might not well represent the use of LLS by students in the same group. The above discussion seems to suggest there were many differences in the strategy choice by students who began learning English at different ages.

From the analysis of the content of the interviews, three more variables were found to be related to the starting age and the use of LLS. It was found that students' starting age did influence their attitudes and goals in learning English. The role of the teacher was found to be more important in the use of LLS for the younger beginners, while the older beginners relied more on their own conceptions and beliefs about language learning. It was obvious that strategy training was necessary in helping students use appropriate strategies to enhance English language learning.

## 5. Conclusion

This research was an investigation into the possible relationship between the learners' use of language learning strategies and their starting age of second language learning. The results of the study seemed to indicate that the individual learner differences in terms of their starting age of second language learning did influence the students' use and choice of language learning strategies. Students who began learning English at different ages used different LLS because of their different attitudes and goals in learning English. Those who began at a younger age learnt English to communicate with foreigners but those who began learning English at an older age learnt English to pass the examinations and get into the universities. Therefore, different LLS were adopted by the two groups of students. This study also reflected that students' strategy use was greatly influenced by their teachers' advice and explicit teaching.

There are several implications of this study for language pedagogy and learning. First, LLS should be incorporated into language courses in order to provide learners with greater opportunities to make language learning an autonomous process. Second, teachers should be able to develop teaching strategies that are compatible with their students' ways of learning. Third, teachers can help students identify their current learning strategies by means of a variety of data collection methods such as interviews, diaries, think-aloud protocols, or other means. Therefore, strategy training is necessary to enhance students' interest in learning English.

To take care of the limitation this study suffered from, the following areas are suggested for future research studies. First, it was revealed that the SILL may not render the differing qualities of students with different starting ages in an appropriate way. Besides structured interviews, as it was mentioned above, other possible methods would be introspective interviews, stimulated recalls, and think-aloud protocols. Second, further research is necessary to investigate if strategy training could be designed to cater for the needs and interest of student with different starting ages in learning English. Third, the role of other variables such as gender can be studied in order to enable the teachers and researchers to draw a more accurate and more global picture of what is happening to individuals when they learn a foreign language.

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